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ONONDAGA CUSTOMS.

THE Onondagas have preserved no traditions of the Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth century, and yet it is easy to find traces of their teachings in tales or customs. J. V. H. Clark mentioned one instance in which he referred to this forgotten influence. "An Indian woman came into the house of a white neighbor one day, terribly frightened; she ran to the hearth, spat upon her hands, dipped them in the ashes, and with her finger made a cross upon her face; then turning suddenly round, exclaimed, 'There, I defy you.'"

The sprinkling with ashes is still common in the Onondaga juggling treatment of the sick, but the point which Mr. Clark emphasized was the use of the cross. It is curious that the old single and double silver crosses are now only to be found there in old pagan families. They seem, however, to attach no more importance to them than to the ordinary silver brooches, now generally laid aside.

A clearer trace of an introduced religious custom may be found in the public confession of sins upon a string of wampum. It is to be premised that prehistoric shell beads are exceedingly rare in the Iroquois territory of New York, and no instance is known of any of the small council wampum before the beginning of the seventeenth century. The middle of that century found it extensively in use, with the mnemonic advantages so well understood by the French missionaries and those of their faith. But the use of wampum for religious purposes by the Iroquois seems of a yet later date. Preparation for some appointed feasts includes public confession of sins, and this seems a modern custom. Preparatory to the White Dog Feast, an Indian rises and takes the beads. Confessing his misdeeds, he says, "I put my words in this string of wampum;" and others follow in the same way. The color of wampum is significant, and its uses many. It was always burned with the white dog at the great feasts, and still goes into the fire, though the animal sacrifice has ceased at Onondaga.

While wampum is employed on all matters of public importance by the men, a curious difference is seen in calling a meeting of women. They hold the Dead Feast at its proper time, and a kernel of corn is the sign of the call. One man is invited as the speaker. The feast occurs ten days after the funeral, each woman bringing her pail of provisions, and these are passed round, so that each has something from all the rest. Part of the food is also placed in the big kettle, and one dish of this is set on the table for the dead. All eat together. Allowing for difference of religious belief, there is little now to distinguish their funerals from our own, and the various former modes of burial need not be related.

A curious account of the ancient Dead Feast, lately written by John Buck, the Onondaga Fire-keeper of the Six Nations of Canada, may be related from its singular resemblance to modern spiritualism. This naturally awakens a doubt of its antique character, while some of the minute touches serve to restore confidence. It was written to a friend the present year, and is a good example of an Indian letter : —

“ John Buck says in olden times of my forefathers was able to recall their departed relatives to see them again ; the living ones will make one accord, whatever their number may be, will get a feast at a certain house for the dead ones, and when the living ones will assemble at the appointed place each of them will take a sliver off their bark door where it turns. This at their different one's houses, and enter noiselessly in the house where the feast is spread out for the dead ; and they will now all sit down next to the wall of the house on the ground all round the house, and the feast is spread out in the centre of the house, and one is appointed to address the Great Creator. At intervals he would throw Indian tobacco¹ on the fire. He will ask the Creator to send their dead relatives, for they are desirous to see them again ; and when he ends it, his speaking, he will sit down again, and they will let the fire go down till the light ceases, so that in the house becomes dark, and no one is allowed to speak or to make any noise ; and in a little while they will hear people coming outside, and they will enter the house, and will sit themselves around the spread feast, and the assembled living ones will wait till the dead ones are about done eating, then the living ones will kindle the slivers of bark which they have brought with them, and the dead are now seen through this light.”

Mourning customs still possess some interest. The funeral is quiet and solemn, the procession walking noiselessly to the grave. Like some other things having relations to all, grave-digging is hereditary. A stake, mound, and a few field stones mark most graves. The female mourners draw their shawls or blankets over their faces, as though to hide their grief. The same thing may occur at other times. Is an Onondaga squaw grieved or angry ? Down comes the shawl over the brows.

In attending many funerals of our own people I have been often surprised to find how many funeral superstitions linger among us. The stopping of the clock, as though in our grief we took no note of time ; the frequent objection to cross a river, or to repass the house

¹ The small tobacco which the New York Onondagas raise, and which all seem to prefer, is called O-yen-kwa hon-we, or “ real tobacco.” It is *N. rustica*, L., introduced by the Indians in Western New York, and sparingly naturalized there. It may be the old kind from which the Tobacco Nation of Canada had its name.

where death had occurred ; the covering of the looking-glass, or turning its face to the wall, have all become familiar. I found the first and last among the Onondagas ; of course recent customs, as they have not long had clocks or mirrors. Was it a superstitious custom among them ? The answer an Indian gave me may throw light on the origin of some of our own omens. It was not superstitious, but significant. The glass was covered because in the time of mourning they had no use for it. It was a token that they were too much grieved to care for the adornment of face and person. Yet how easy to think that a breach of funeral propriety would bring ill luck to the offender ! I had been told of their desire to go into another world arrayed in new clothing, as though putting away the defilements of this, but it resolved itself into our own habit of decently clothing the dead. In this case, however, some allowance may be made for their old ideas of the future life.

Although white physicians visit them, and they have doctors of their own, yet some reliance is placed on the visits of the False Faces. It may be said here that a friend, in getting them to take our remedies, found a plain argument very effectual. It was that the old Indian remedies were good for the original Indian diseases, but that they needed the white man's medicine for those which he had brought among them. The medicine was taken.

A good Indian friend of mine, of local reputation as a physician of the Onondaga old school, gives her daughter medical training in this way : they go to the woods, and the mother finds certain plants, describes their properties and modes of use, points out their characters, and gives all necessary information. They then go home, and a few days later go out again. This time the daughter finds the plant and gives the lecture. The likeness to some of our advanced courses of study is easily seen.

The False Faces follow another mode of treatment. In their ceremonies they wear masks, those of wood and metal differing in no wise from those John Bartram saw there in 1743. The sick send for them, and they scatter ashes over them, and hold dances around, to drive off disease. The False Faces appear at other times, as on the seventh and eighth nights of the White Dog Feast. When they come in at this time questions are asked of them, and they are told what to do. A greater occasion comes generally eight days¹ after the feast, the False Faces going to every house and searching it, poking into the ashes, crawling under beds and into corners, pretending to find and drive off diseases and other evil things. They are thought especially useful in ridding the reservation of witches,

¹ This varies from seven to ten days, as may be convenient.

though these seem to live on.¹ They are given tobacco, flour, or meal. When they have made the rounds they go to the council-house, and all the False Faces dance, but the women wear no masks. A dance for everybody follows. Other feasts may occur, and if any one wishes to become a member he invites them to a feast.

Though following the teachings of the Peace Prophet, the Onondaga stated feasts differ in some respects from the other Iroquois. I give a brief account as furnished me by Albert Cusick :—

The first and greatest is the New Year's, or White Dog Feast, the origin of which is obscure, but which occurs at the time and has taken the place of the ancient Dream Feast.² The latter was a time of the maddest license, but had no sacrifice. The modern feast among the Onondagas differed much from that so often described among the Senecas, where it seems to have had an earlier observance. It commences late in January or early in February, and properly lasts fourteen days. Three days are devoted to penitential exercises and confession of sins. Three days of gambling³ follow, with four clans on a side. On the last day of gambling both parties chant alternately, and also make speeches in turn. At the end, two men oddly dressed, one for each party, go singly to every pagan house, running in with a hoe and poking around in the ashes. They do not now put out the fire. They used to rake the ashes with their hands, but have now abandoned this practice. They talk to the inmates, and tell them to take all the children to the evening ceremonies. One comes first, and when he goes out the other soon comes in.

In the evening there are ceremonies at the council-house. One party meets there and the other at a house near by. Speeches are

¹ For witches, see Clark's *History of Onondaga*, vol. i. p. 43; Schoolcraft's *Report on the Iroquois*, p. 87; and Morgan's *League of the Iroquois*, p. 164. There are many early references.

² The Honnonouaroria, or Iroquois Dream Feast, should be studied in connection with the White Dog Feast, of which it was the original. It may be found in the Jesuit *Relations*, but more conveniently at page 102 of the Rev. Dr. Hawley's *Early Chapters of Cayuga History*, where there is a good translation of Father Dablon's account of it at Onondaga, February, 1656. On page 105 will also be found the same missionary's account of the annual war feast, occurring a few days earlier. These make it evident that the White Dog Feast is a modern institution among the Onondagas. Mr. Horatio Hale's *Book of Iroquois Rites* is an excellent authority on modern condolences, etc., but for the history and changes of these it is necessary to consult such works as the *New York Colonial History*.

³ The gambling with peach stones at the great feast (*Morgan's League of the Iroquois*, p. 307) now has mainly a religious or significant use, the clans being divided into what the Onondagas call the Long and the Short House. On early sites I have picked up the small stone and terra cotta disks used before they had peach stones, and have seen those of flint. Whatever the material, the size was about the same.

made in each, and they remain apart three days. In the house near by, a man will take another by the hand, and say to the rest, "My friend wants something. Guess what it is." It may be corn, wood, clothes, or meat, and this seems a remnant of the old Dream Feast custom. They guess until the right thing is mentioned. When this is done he says "Thank you," and goes out with some others, who fire guns towards the council-house. He calls out that they have something to tell, and they are admitted. He says that his friend wants something, and when they have guessed rightly he says "Thank you." Then he sings for his friend, and leads him round, after which they go back to their own clans. This goes on for three nights.

On the last two nights, the seventh and eighth, the False Faces come in as before related. On the ninth morning the white dog is burned towards noon. A long rope is taken, tied once in the middle, and passed around the dog's neck. Several men pull at each end and choke him, after which he is painted and decorated, and finally burned. The other ceremonies have been often described, but after the burning all go home. It is more proper to say that this *was once done*, for no dog has been burned at Onondaga for two years past. I asked Chief La Fort why this happened, and he said the sacred breed of dogs had run out. Other Indians, however, think this but an excuse for discontinuing the sacrifice, which had lost its solemnity. Forty years ago the Onondagas burned two white dogs on an altar pile; then but one; then it was dropped into a stove, and now the white dog seems to have finally disappeared.¹

The solemn season has not yet terminated. On the tenth day there is a dance for the children, names are given, and some persons may be adopted, adoption properly coming at the children's dance. The person to be received is presented by a member of the clan to a chief, with his name. The chief makes a speech to the assembly, saying that such a clan has adopted this person by such a name, because he is a good man, or one who has been or will be of great service to them. The presenter then leads him around the assembly, uttering a meaningless chant.

On the eleventh day is the dance for the Four Persons, Ki-yae-neung-kwa-tah-ka. These seem the Four Messengers who made the revelation to Ga-ne-o-di-o, the Peace Prophet. On the twelfth day are dances for Ta-eh-yea-wah-ke, the holder of the heavens, followed by dances for the Thunders on the next day. On the last day the men and women take opposite sides in gambling. If the men win there will be a good season, the ears of corn growing long and the stalks tall, like men, not short, like women.

¹ The dog was last burned in 1885, and a detailed account was given in the Syracuse papers.

The Planting Feast comes in May, or when the ground is ready. There are three days for penitential and religious services, one day for the children's dance, and one each for the Four Persons, the Holder of the heavens, the Thunder, and for gambling. On one afternoon I saw the Indians turning out to shoot birds, squirrels, or anything they could find, for the next day's feast. They were armed with guns and bows, the latter predominating.

The Strawberry Feast comes when the berries are ripe, and for one day there are dances for the Thunder and a feast on strawberries.

The Green Bean Dance follows, when these are fit for use. There are dances one day for the Thunder, comprising the war and feather dances, and the feast follows.

The Green Corn Dance is later. There are three days for religious services, one for the children, one for the Four Persons, one for the Holder of the heavens, and one for the Thunder, with the feast. The Thanksgiving Feast in October is much the same.¹

Besides their tales of the supernatural, the Onondagas enjoy a funny story, and such a one may come into their most solemn rites. With all his dignity, Capt. George had a stock of these for fireside use, and a single one of his may illustrate this class.

Years ago the Onondagas used to go to a grove near Onondaga Lake, in the spring, to make maple sugar, and in the fall to the Salt Springs, to boil salt. Two brothers went there one autumn, and while their wives made salt they went off to hunt in opposite directions. A storm came up, and one of them thought of a cabin at the sugar camp, where he might find shelter. It grew dark as he reached it, and he had been there but a little while when he heard something coming. It was his brother, but he thought it was a bear, which might eat him up. So he kept close to the wall, and squatted down as low as he could. As his brother breathed hard while feeling around, he thought it was the bear smelling for him, and when his cold hands brushed across his face he thought they were the bear's paws. But the other was just as frightened, for he thought he had put his hands on a dead man's face. So they clinched and wrestled, without saying a word, but neither could throw the other. They wrestled till they were out of breath, and then one said, "Are you a man?" But he could only speak in a frightened whisper. Then the other said, "*Are you* a man?" And they were more frightened than ever, for each thought the other a ghost. So they wrestled

¹ Morgan says that the Thanksgiving dance and concert were both supposed to be peculiarly acceptable to He-no, the Thunder. The *League of the Iroquois* is full and excellent on modern customs, but it is a study of the Senecas, not of the other nations.

again, but neither was thrown. Then one whispered, "Are you a *live* man?" and the other answered, "Are you a *live* man?" Then they let go, and got back to the wall. Then one got his breath, and said, "Who are you? Are you a human being?" But when he spoke so loud his brother knew his voice, and was glad to find him there.

The use of wampum belts is generally understood, but that of wampum strings not so well. I have so often had the latter explained by Indians that I can hardly judge of their interest to other people. Regarding this article, Thomas Webster, keeper of the Onondaga wampum, testified before the New York Legislative Committee, in July, 1888, that "It means nothing to white man; all to Indian." He gave this tradition: "There is a tree set in the ground, and it touches the heavens. Under that tree sits this wampum. It sits on a log. Coals of fire is unquenchable, and the Six Nations are at this council-fire held by this tribe. To-do-da-ho, a member of the Bear clan, is the Great Chief here. He has a descendant in our tribe to-day." He seems to describe a mystic scene of the past.

Among my wampum strings, once used at Onondaga, a black string, with both ends meeting, is a call for a mourning council, used commonly at the death of a war chief. A bunch of three strings of black wampum, joined only at one end, is the proper call for a condolence over a principal chief. A larger bunch of beads, mostly black, which I have, contains a solemn charge to a new chief. A religious council is called with white wampum, as being pure and holy. Similarly the moral law, in which is no imperfection, is enforced with ten strings of white wampum, a chief telling me that these were all good, like the Bible. Three strings, mostly white, contained the new chief's new name. A dead chief is mourned on ten strings of black wampum; for one who has merely lost his office, six short strings suffice. Six strings of dark beads represent the Six Nations; when the ends of these are brought together, forming a circle on a table, the council is open for business. Three nations are brothers, and their bunches of strings differ slightly from those of the other brotherhood. When each nation is addressed in council it is on its own proper wampum. For other occasions there are still other strings.

Perhaps the most curious trace of the early Jesuit teaching among them, mingled with Indian ideas and modern events, is found in the Onondaga legend of Hi-a-wat-ha, as given to Mr. Clark in 1845. He recorded it with many interesting details, which will repay analysis, but which I leave out of this brief summary.

Ta-oun-ya-wat-ha, the god of rivers (compare the frequent connection of Christ with the living waters in the Bible), comes to earth

and reveals his divine origin to two Onondagas by the lake. These become associates in his great work, and after his departure are prominent leaders in the league of peace. He encounters great serpents at the outset, whose power is destroyed. Obstructions are removed from the Oswego and Seneca rivers, making their waters navigable, and at the same time Onondaga Lake is lowered by a straight cut, — things done by the white man in the early part of this century. He goes about through the country procuring blessings and destroying enemies, and then lives quietly among the people as a man, taking the name of Hi-a-wat-ha. When a great danger threatens his people, not yet united in one lasting brotherhood, he is called to meet the great council, where men have gone up from all parts of the land. Troubled in spirit, and foreseeing some great trial, he goes not at first; and when again called, he enters alone into the sacred lodge where his white canoe is kept, prays there in secret, and comes forth resigned. He goes to the council freely but sorrowfully, and endures the dreaded trial. When his daughter is crushed to earth, and he is deprived of hope and comfort, even the great white bird assumes the form of the cross, and its pure plumes insure victory to later wearers. Overcome by affliction, he lies as one dead for three days. Roused to life, he gives wise counsel and commands, forms the peaceful league, sets all in due order, appoints its officers, and then, resuming his divinity, amid celestial music ascends to heaven in his white canoe. His counsels are followed, and the league of peace and love grows and prospers.

Taking this as an Indian paraphrase of the life of Christ related to them two centuries ago, we find here his birth, temptation, choice of disciples, good works, the going up to suffer before the assembled people, the solitary agony, death, and resurrection, and at last the establishment of the Church and the ascension. Even the use of the tangible means of suffering as a source of power and a guard against danger, so prominent in the significant French missionary teaching, is not left out.

To this may be added, from a kindred legend, the divesting of To-do-da-ho of the snaky appendages of his head, which petrified all who came near him. By Hi-a-wat-ha's divine power this was done, and a terrible foe was transformed into a friend. The power of death was broken, and those things which had been "entangled," or mysteries, were made plain. This was the broken recollection of early teaching, strong in its features, but changed in details. The clothing is that of the Indian, but the structure is not.

Some of our nursery tales of recent introduction have undergone a rapid transformation, but with their fondness for gifts it is interesting to observe that the Six Nations have partially adopted our

New Year. On that day they go from house to house in parties, sometimes in families, expecting cakes at every door, and saying "New Yah," or "Ne-ah," for New Year. Some get more than others, from relationship. Of paternal relatives it is said that they are Ah-kā-kah-to-ne-ha-no; *i. e.*, "On my father's side," and they are considered fathers, as in early days. Albert Cusick's father was a Turtle, his mother an Eel, and he was of his mother's clan. But all the Turtles, as being his fathers, gave him a double portion of cakes on New Year's day. "Hello!" said they, "here is *our* child. Give him more." When our names are used the child is called after his father.

Without describing their various games it may be of interest to note that they have anticipated our children in one, which has given name to a flower. Violets are termed Da-keah-noo-wi-dus, *Two Heads entangled*, as in the way so often seen where the heads are interlocked and pulled apart by the stems.

Many other matters of interest I find in visiting this ancient people, but they are fast laying aside their old customs, and forgetting their old traditions. Already it is difficult to get information on many points except from the very oldest people. When these are gone all that is unrecorded will die with them.¹

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¹ The literature of the White Dog sacrifice is tolerably full. Cotton Mather, in his *Magnalia*, mentions the occasional sacrifice of dogs among the New England Indians. In Colden's *Five Nations*, and elsewhere, there are references to the eating of dogs at war feasts in New York, but they do not appear there as sacrifices until the Revolutionary War. Several notices of the simple offering will be found in the journals in Gen. Sullivan's *Indian Expedition in 1779*, recently published by the State of New York. The Rev. Samuel Kirkland seems first to have described the White Dog Feast proper, and there is an account of it in the *Life of Mary Jemison*, the "White Woman." Descriptions may also be found by the following references, all of which are needful in showing its varying character: *Annals of Tryon County*, p. 178, and Appendix, p. 75. *Dwight's Travels*, vol. iv. *Stone's Life of Brant*, vol. i. p. 388. *Howe's Historical Collections of New York*, p. 268, taken from O'Reilly's *Sketches of Rochester*. *Clark's History of Onondaga*, vol. i. p. 55. *Morgan's League of the Iroquois*, p. 207. Horatio Hale, *American Antiquarian*, vol. vii. p. 7, "The Iroquois Sacrifice of the White Dog." W. M. Beauchamp, *American Antiquarian*, vol. vii. p. 288, "The Iroquois White Dog Feast." "Notes on the Religious Rites of the so-called Senecas of Sandusky," *Howe's Historical Collections of Ohio*, p. 460. [Published in 1847, but written about 1830. This account varies from the others, relating to a people still Iroquois, but farther west.] The Onondagas and Senecas only seem to have observed this feast. Charlevoix has reference to a dog sacrifice among the Miamis. "Dog Feast of the Miamis," *Journal of Charlevoix*, letter 14.